HOW DOES PARENTING CHANGE US?

NURTURE THE WOW: THE CONVERSATION SERIES

Welcome to the *Nurture the Wow* conversation series!

These guides offer parents of young children a chance to sit back and reflect on how parenting has impacted their hearts, lives, and spirituality. They provide tools, ideas and lenses that can help parents engage the work of raising their children more deeply, with more intentionality–with more thoughtfulness during the difficult moments, and more joy overall.

There are ten conversation guides in this series. Each uses an excerpt from one chapter of *Nurture The Wow: Finding Spirituality in the Frustration, Boredom, Tears, Poop, Desperation, Wonder, and Radical Amazement of Parenting* as its core interpretive object, addressing the major themes in a conversation around parenting and spirituality, such as love, the mundane, the body, selfhood, and God.

One does not have to have read the book in order to participate in these discussions, though of course having done so can make the conversations richer and deeper. The guides each serve as independent units–so a community may decide to hold all ten discussions or only some of them. Having participants return again and again will deepen community in powerful ways, but the guides are not designed to build upon one another–so if a person misses one conversation, they won't necessarily be left out of the next one. One possibility is to offer a copy of the book to everyone who makes it to all ten conversations, as an incentive to prioritize attendance.

Contents:

Nurture the Wow: Finding Spirituality in the Frustration, Boredom, Tears, Poop, Desperation, Wonder, and Radical Amazement of Parenting
By Danya Ruttenberg. Flatiron Books, Spring 2016. NurtureTheWow.com

FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

HOW TO USE THE *NURTURE THE WOW* CONVERSATION GUIDES

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As this is a conversation series about parenting, one consideration that those planning these conversations may want to take into account is childcare–where will the children be while parents are engaging in a few rare moments of thoughtful, reflective conversation? Will this happen at a time when parents of young children will be able to make it? For some communities, a weekday evening when people are quiet and reflective is best; for others, a weekend morning or afternoon might be more successful. If your community can help provide babysitting or a kids' activity, it may make attendance more possible for some parents. You may want to even hold a children's activity on a parallel topic while the conversation is taking place. While the parents are engaged in the conversation about the body, for example, children can be elsewhere coloring in a version of the *asher yatzar* prayer to hang up outside their own bathroom at home, or drawing pictures of all the amazing things their bodies can do.

<u>These conversations are designed to last about an hour</u>–perhaps a bit less time, or a bit more time, depending on how the conversation flows. You may want to block off an hour and a half in order to make sure that everyone has time to get settled, to move at a leisurely pace and to not be cut off if the conversation is particularly rich.

Most parts of these guides are meant to be read by members of the group, so you should plan to ask participants to take turns reading sections. Alternatively, you can choose the first reader of a section, and then that reader

chooses the next reader. Please read, or have participants read, the introductions to the WELCOME, LEARN and DO sections out loud.

Participants should have printouts of the discussion guides in hand when the conversation begins.

ABOUT THE "WELCOME" SECTION

Beginning with some shared agreements about what kind of conversation this is can shape the flow of the conversation itself. It's meant to be is a way of establishing a certain kind of confidentiality in the circle and reminding participants to be present, mindful of others, and to speak out of personal experience, rather than in generalities. Some people may be used to discussions of this type, and for others, this format–particularly the emphasis on "I" statements–may be new.

- The welcome section can be read by the facilitator, but it may be even better have the introduction and each ground rule read by a participant, or different participants.
- If you'd like to take a few minutes to brainstorm on additional ground rules that the group would like to include, you can.

ABOUT THE "ASK AND SHARE" SECTION

Beginning the conversation by inviting people to share from their personal experience enables everyone to get to know each other a little bit and establish some intimacy, and for participants to begin to become personally invested in the conversation, before we get to the interpretive text material.

- Give everyone a moment to organize their thoughts before they begin.
- Encourage participants to be brief–no more than a sentence or so–in their answers.
- Sometimes you can choose have everyone go around the circle and share their answer with the whole group.
- You can invite people to share "popcorn style,"–that is, when the spirit moves them–it's not necessary to go around the circle in order.
- Another time–during a different conversation on a different day–you might choose to pair people or put them in small groups to answer the question.
- Another time, you might hold a lightning round, asking participants to answer the question in no more than 5 words, in 1:1 conversations with a number of different people in the group.

ABOUT THE "LEARN" SECTION

The "Learn" section is the heart of our conversation. The interpretive object–the text–is intentionally chosen so that the conversation can begin about the *object* and move gradually towards *personal reflection*. Before the conversation, look over the types of questions that are included in this section. While you don't need to ask every question, you should ask some from both Interpretive and Reflective categories.

The order of the questions matters! Interpretive questions, and only then reflective questions. Interpretive discussion primes the conversation for better reflection. By focusing on the questions of "What does the text mean when it says X?" or "What is it trying to say?" we allow the individuals in the group to work through their own issues in dialogue with the text, and we help the group form stronger bonds by doing the shared work of trying to interpret it. This then enables the more reflective, personal dimension of the conversation to begin on a deeper level.

- Sometimes you may want to have one volunteer read the whole text to the group.
- Other times you may have different voices each reading a paragraph or a section.
- Other times, you may choose to have people pair off and read the piece aloud and begin discussing the interpretive questions in 1:1 conversations before bringing the group back together, and continuing the discussion on interpretive and reflective sections.
- You can invite people to spend a moment or two in silence thinking about the text before proceeding with the conversation.
- Sometimes comments are vague or generic because the participant isn't quite sure what to say or how to express what they think. A gentle question ("Can you give us an example of when you felt this?") can help open up the comment. It can even help to simply say, "Can you say more about that?
- Don't be afraid of silence: People are silent when they are thinking. Studies show the average person takes 7 seconds to process a question and formulate a response. Trust that the group is thinking, and trust that they want the conversation to succeed just as much as you—eventually, they'll speak up. Over time, many facilitators and conversation participants come to value the ability to be quiet together in a group as one of the most important parts of a group conversation.
- As the facilitator, you are there to balance the talkers with the listeners to make sure everyone is heard. Saying, "Is there someone who hasn't spoken who'd like to share their thoughts?" can be one way to do so that doesn't put anyone on the spot.

ABOUT THE "DO" SECTION

This is a chance for participants to think more deeply about ideas that may have been brought to the surface during the LEARN section, and to make some intentional choices about what they might want to bring from the conversation into their lives.

- You can ask people to share their responses to the "DO" questions with the whole group.
- You can ask people to pair off and talk 1:1 with a partner.
- You can ask people to write (or draw a picture) for a few minutes in response to the questions and then share (or not share) a sentence or two of what they concluded with the group.
- You can ask participants to write a phrase in response to each of the questions on different post-its and post the post-its on the wall so that everyone can see everyone's response, and then discuss what they saw, or to choose someone else's post-it that spoke particularly to them and share about that.

There are a lot of ways to use these conversation guides to create a powerful, rich conversation.

QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN PREPARING THE DISCUSSION

WHERE?

- Does the place where you're having the conversation create a space in which people can feel safe?
- Is it a closed space? Does it have a door you can close to ensure privacy and confidentiality when needed?
- What can you do to make the space visually appealing or lovely? Does it have windows to let in light? Do you want to play some music?
- Can everyone sit comfortably in a circle?

WHEN?

- Are you scheduling the conversation at a time when everyone can be physically awake and present?
- Will there be childcare provided so that parents can focus on the conversation? Are parents required to arrange their own childcare at home?
- Will people be hungry? Will you provide food or drink?
- Will they be tired or sleepy after a meal?
- How long will the conversation be?
- How will you break up the time if necessary?

WHO AND HOW?

- How many people will participate? Will there be enough participants to sustain diverse conversation? Will there be too many to keep the conversation centered? (The ideal number is probably between 8-15 participants, but could go up to 20.)
- How will you get the word out and then remind people?
- Do you need to make any special arrangements for people with disabilities?
- Who will welcome people to the conversation and how will they do it?
- How will you close the conversation?
- How will you follow up with people?
- How will you capture their contact information?

WHAT ABOUT YOU?

- What will you do to get yourself ready?

HOW DO WE LOVE?

A *NURTURE THE WOW* CONVERSATION GUIDE

WELCOME

Welcome to our conversation! We hope this will be a meaningful chance to think and share together.

In order for our conversation to be as rich as it can be, we need everyone to feel that they can both really share and really listen. Therefore, what is said in this conversation stays in this conversation, and may not be repeated outside it.

Here are a few more agreements to help shape this discussion:

- Our aim is to create a space where we can understand others and understand ourselves, not to give advice or to argue ideas of objective truth. With that in mind, in this conversation we will agree to speak in the first-person, about our own truth.
- We will assume good faith in one another.
- We will open ourselves to listen and learn from one another.
- We won't rush to fill the silence.

Can we all agree to these things?

ASK AND SHARE

Let's take a moment to introduce ourselves. Please think of something that's surprised you about being a parent—something that you hadn't expected before your kid(s) entered your life. Then we'll go around and share our names and what came to mind.

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LEARN

Our culture often talks about love as the cure to everything. Romantic comedies end with the discovery of love, implying that the hard part is over, and that the rest of it—engaging in a healthy long-term relationship with another person—is easy as pie. More to the point, we often hear about parental love as though it were something simple and straightforward, effortless, without emotional messiness or challenge. But as fierce and profound as parents' love can be, it's not always necessarily simple.

In this excerpt from *Nurture the Wow*, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg wonders if defining love in a different way can help us understand our relationships with our children more deeply. She cites feminist theorist bell hooks, who intentionally spells her name in lowercase letters. Please read this section aloud as a group.

Maybe love isn't a single, fixed state. It's an action, or a series of actions. The feminist theorist bell hooks cites author M. Scott Peck's definition of love, based on the work of the philosopher Erich Fromm. Love is, she claims, the "will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth." "The will to extend yourself": to push past your comfort level; to, you know, work really hard. That means to do things you never thought you'd do, and may not particularly want to. But you do them. You stretch and extend, because someone needs you to, so that they can grow.

That kind of extending of the self looks like all sorts of things. I think about the times I've had to battle my boredom at the sandbox so that I can actually engage with my kids, who really want me to talk about firetrucks with them. Extending the self is about the moment when the tantrum is going down right as you need to be getting somewhere and you realize you have to slow down and pull, from underneath your annoyance and your desire to just physically force the child out the door, some compassion to help dial down her out-of-control feeling. It's about the willingness to get out of bed at two a.m. to be with the child who's totally shaken by a nightmare. According to hooks, love is in the nurturing of our own or another's spiritual growth; we do that all the time. It's about enabling our beloveds to feel secure, enabling them to be able to do the work they need to do. It's about enabling them to feel the warm rays of our attention on their skin even when we kind of actually want to just zone out and play Candy Crush on our phone. Sometimes it means taking care of their physical needs even if we're not home emotionally—keeping them fed and safe and warm counts for an awful lot when you just want to hide under the bed or catch the next flight to Tijuana. So, OK, let's add Candy Crush back to that list, too.

The love we give out doesn't only flow in one direction, though. When we extend ourselves to help foster others' growth, when we engage in the striving necessary to accept them as they are—that changes us, too. In love, we extend beyond the narrow boundaries of the self in order to enter into communion with another.

Interpretive Questions:

- How would you paraphrase hooks' preferred definition of love?
- What does hooks suggest changes in our thinking about love when it's defined as an action, not a feeling?
- What does Ruttenberg think enacting this definition of love looks like? For children? For parents?
- How does she understand what "spiritual growth" is?

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Reflective Questions:

- When was a time that you experienced hooks' definition of love in your own relationship with your kid(s)?
- Does the phrase "spiritual growth" speak to you? Why or why not? If not, are there ways that you might reformulate this language that would speak to you?
- If it does speak to you, do you agree with the way it's understood here?
- Do you agree with Ruttenberg that giving love in this way changes parents as well as children?
- How have you been changed through the acts of love you offer your kid(s)?

DO

The act of loving our children—loving in genuine ways that foster the wholeness of all involved—can push us to grow in ways that aren't always easy. But when we enter it fully, amazing things can happen. As the author and poet Maya Angelou once said, "Love is that condition in the human spirit so profound that it empowers us to develop courage; to trust that courage and build bridges with it; to trust those bridges and cross over them so we can attempt to reach each other."

As we conclude the conversation, here are a few final questions to consider:

- What's one insight that you've gained from this conversation?
- What is one thing you want to change in your life as a parent, based on this conversation?
- What's one obstacle to you making that change, and how can you overcome it? Who might you need help from in order to make this change?
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HOW DO WE FIND JOY IN THE MUNDANE?

A *NURTURE THE WOW* CONVERSATION GUIDE

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ASK AND SHARE

Let's take a moment to introduce ourselves. Please think of an aspect of childcare and/or parenting that you find, well, tedious. (It's OK, really—we won't tell.) Then we'll go around and share our names and what came to mind.

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LEARN

Let's face it—there are aspects of the work of parenting that can feel a little bit... boring. Whether it's cleaning up the cheerios from the floor yet again, reading *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* for the 245,439th time today, or sometimes just engaging with an adorable, loving, cherub-faced individual who isn't quite up to a robust adult conversation yet, parents often struggle with the fact that not every moment of caring for the next generation is equally intellectually riveting. So how do we make sense of, and find joy in, the most mundane of moments?

In this excerpt from *Nurture the Wow*, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg looks to one of modern Judaism's greatest minds for insights. Please read this section aloud as a group.

It can sometimes take me forty-five minutes to get Yonatan to walk a block because, wow, he just found a stick!! And the stick is very important!! And now he needs to beat it against the tree!! And what happens if he jams it into the crack between the sidewalk?? It's a sword! It's a magic wand! And oh, hey, is that a truck? What kind of truck is that? Moooommmy!! Did you see the truuuuuck?!

Some of you may be familiar with this phenomenon.

A lot of the time my response to this kind of potchke-ing, as my mom called it, is impatience. After all, we are on the way to meet someone at an actual time over here in external reality, or even, hey, watching Yonatan bash the stick against the tree is kind of boring for me and did I mention that I need to pee? I get antsy, and I tend to check out of actually engaging with him and, rather, just do what I can—beg, borrow, steal, wheedle, coerce—to get the next thing to happen.

The twentieth-century rabbi and theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote a lot about "radical amazement," that sense of "wow" about the world, which he claimed is the root of spirituality. It's the kind of thing that people often experience in nature—at the proverbial mountaintop, when walking in the woods, seeing a gorgeous view of the ocean. But it's also, I think, about bringing that sense of awe into the little things we often take for granted, or consider part of the background of our lives. This includes the flowers on the side of the road; the taste of ice cream in our mouths; how groovy it is to suck on a straw and get milk in your mouth; or to find a really, *really* good stick on the ground. And it also includes things we generally don't even think of as pleasures, like the warm soapy water on our hands as we wash dishes.

The real master teachers of radical amazment are, of course, kids. And we can let our children move us—we can feel vicarious joy at our baby's face, full of shock and delight at a new experience. When our kid finds that damn stick when we're walking, we can climb on that radical amazement train and ride it for a moment or two as opposed to dragging them away from it to whatever Very Important Place we're trying to get to. And sometimes, on alternate Thursdays, or at least when we can, we can try to remember that having that whole long fight about how it's time to drop the stick and get going, no, really, I meant that *now*, please, usually takes about as long as it does to just have a little damn wonder.

Interpretive Questions:

- Why does Ruttenberg struggle with her kids' preferred pace sometimes?

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- What is "radical amazement," as described here?
- How does Ruttenberg claim that children experience radical amazement?
- How does she think that parents can?

Reflective Questions:

- Do your children seem to experience radical amazement? What does it look like for them?
- Have you ever experienced radical amazement? When? What happened?
- Can every mundane experience be turned into one of wonder? Why or why not?
- What are the challenges for you in turning a mundane experience into one of awe and wonder?

DO

Rabbi Heschel once wrote, "As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines.... Mankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living." In some ways, being an exhausted parent of small kids makes it harder than usual to be in the zone of awe and wonder–but in a lot of other ways, they can help us help get there, and teach us by their own example.

As we conclude the conversation, here are a few final questions to consider:

- What's one insight that you've gained from this conversation?
- What is one thing you want to change in your life as a parent, based on this conversation?
- What's one obstacle to you making that change, and how can you overcome it? Who might you need help from in order to make this change?
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WHAT DO WE LEARN FROM DIFFICULT FEELINGS?

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ASK AND SHARE

Let's take a moment to introduce ourselves. Please think of a time recently when, as a parent, you felt like you were really going to lose it—or you really lost it—in frustration, anger, desperation, irritation, or something else. Then we'll go around and share our names and what came to mind.

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LEARN

Our children sometimes elicit less-than-ideal feelings and reactions from us. Whether it's because a kid is pitching a massive tantrum because you set a reasonable boundary, stubbornly refusing to perform some basic and necessary task, gleefully causing damage to your home or one of your belongings or insisting that they didn't just do the forbidden thing you *saw them do with your very own eyes*, we've all had moments when our frustration, annoyance and even anger bubbles up to the surface. What do we do with that fact, though? And how can these moments when we don't feel like our ideal parenting selves serve as instructive teachers for our ultimate growth?

In this excerpt from *Nurture the Wow*, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg looks at a traditional Jewish concept for insight. Please read this section aloud as a group.

Every Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, rabbis start talking about the work of the season, *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah* is usually translated as "repentance," but it literally means, "return." It's about coming back to where you need to be—emotionally, spiritually, ethically, interpersonally—and repairing any damage you've done in your relationships with others, and perhaps with God, when your actions strayed from your ideals. The classical literature on *teshuvah* talks about the accounting of the soul that happens as part of this process. That is, you have to spend some uncomfortable time figuring out exactly how and when you've failed to be the person you want to be. Essentially, you can't return—make *teshuvah*—until you have some real understanding about where you've gone; you can't make amends until you're clear on how you've messed up.

Luckily for us parents, we are offered ample opportunities to see our failings. All we need to do, probably, is to pay attention to how we are with our children for a couple of hours—a week max—and we'll get a lot of telling information. When are we attentive? When are we dismissive? When are we pretending to be engaged but are actually checked out (or checking our phones)? When are we manipulative or deceitful with our kids, even with little things that ostensibly "don't matter"? When do we run out of patience, and what does that look like? Children are, among other things, powerful little mirrors, and not all of what they reflect back to us about who and how we are is necessarily comfortable or fun to see.

The good news is that if we can untangle the places where we're stuck and broken as parents, it can powerfully impact our entire lives. Rabbi Alan Lew used to say that a person should watch his behavior (including decisions, motivations, and emotions) around food, money, or sex, and he will see all of the neuroses and problems of his life illuminated—the universe in the grain of sand, if you will. Needless to say, I think a hard look at our parenting can do the same thing. Our relationships with our kids offers an easy-access on-ramp to all of our laziness, pettiness, and unresolved stuff, if we're willing to look; fixing this one little corner of our lives can shift things around everywhere.

Fortunately, kids continue—over and over and over—to offer us the chance to try again, to do better. The intensity of these bonds are indeed an enclosed spiritual space in which to do the work that we need to do. It's tricky, sometimes, and inelegant, but if we choose to face who we are with intention and humility, there's the possibility for us to grow into the people our children so desperately need us to be.

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Interpretive Questions:

- What is *tshuvah*? How might you describe it in your own words?
- Why is getting clear on our failures part of the *tshuvah* process?
- How would observing one's parenting help illuminate all of the issues in a person's life?
- What does Ruttenberg suggest paying attention to our less-than-perfect parenting moments might teach us?

Reflective Questions:

- In what ways does parenting serve as an uncomfortable mirror in your life?
- Have you ever done *tshuvah*—made amends—for something you said or did with your kid(s?) If so, what happened?
- Can a person "untangle the ways [they're] stuck and broken as parents"? If so, how? Is everyone stuck and broken in some way?
- How should we handle it when we don't respond to our children in the way we might ideally wish to?

DO

Of course we're all going to feel frustrated and angry some days, as a parent. We're just as fallible and human in this aspect of our lives as we are in every other aspect of our lives. But as the poet Rumi once suggested, we should nonetheless "welcome and entertain" every single one of the feelings that comes to visit as an honored guest, as a "guide from beyond." Even our ickiest, stickiest feelings can be our teachers, if we let them.

As we conclude the conversation, here are a few final questions to consider:

- What's one insight that you've gained from this conversation?
- What is one thing you want to change in your life as a parent, based on this conversation?
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WHAT POWER DO WE HAVE?

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- We will open ourselves to listen and learn from one another.
- We won't rush to fill the silence.

Can we all agree to these things?

ASK AND SHARE

Let's take a moment to introduce ourselves. What's one of your greatest fears for your children, as a parent? Take a moment to sit with the question, but try to answer with the first think that you thought of. Then we'll go around and share our names and what came to mind.

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LEARN

We have so much power over our children. We determine so many aspects of their day-to-day life—whether or not they can have dessert, whether they can go to the park without a jacket, in what kind of environment they'll spend their days. But more than that, we have a huge influence on the bigger things: how they regard their own self-worth, how they understand love, for what they feel permission to dream. What do we do with all that power? How can we understand it, make sense of its sometimes crushing weight?

In this excerpt from *Nurture the Wow*, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg muses on the nature and potential of parental power. Please read this section aloud as a group.

William Makepeace Thackeray wrote in his nineteenth-century novel *Vanity Fair*: "Mother is the name of God in the lips and hearts of little children." And I think, at least in part, that Thackeray is talking about how we are our children's everything—their judges and comforters, their providers and boundary-setters. We determine if they will receive the proverbial rain for their harvest or if they will suffer hunger and drought. Whether they get their basic needs met. Whether they will receive the love that they spend their whole lives seeking.

God is portrayed as a parent up and down traditional religious sources—mostly as a father, but not exclusively. The metaphor is burned deep into our collective cultural psyche, and it reveals a lot about how we think about parents and children, power and powerlessness. At the same time, though, it also challenges some of our conventional thinking about parenting and power. The way the somewhat anthropomorphized character of God is written in the Torah can offer us a unique way of understanding the weight of this responsibility—as a partnership with, rather than control over, the small people who are dependent on us in almost every way.

...Just as God-the-metaphorical-parent forges a covenant with the people Israel, so, too, can we choose to think of our relationships with our children as covenantal, a sacred pact of obligation. When a covenant is forged between a ruler and his people or the divine and a community, it's not necessarily a symmetrical relationship—and neither is a parent-child relationship. Despite the asymmetry, though, covenantal relationships presume that both parties have obligations to one another and that each party can impact the other. As novelist Rebecca Goldstein put it, it's about "the knower and the known, always susceptible to each other's influence." In other words, two parties—even with different levels of power—are able to be in the kind of relationship together that matters deeply to both, that influences and transforms both.

Interpretive Questions:

- What does the Thackeray quote mean?
  How does Ruttenberg think that parents have power?
- In what ways does Ruttenberg suggest that parents are like the Biblical description of God?
- How does she think that the parenting relationship is covenantal?
- How does the Rebecca Goldstein quote apply to parenting?

Reflective Questions:

- In what ways are parents not like God?
- Does the language of "covenant" appeal to you in your own parenting? If so, what might that look like on the ground?
- When was a time that you felt like a "knower" in your relationship with your child(ren)?

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- When was a time when you felt like the "known" in your relationship with your child(ren)?
- When do you have power as a parent? When are you powerless?

DO

Naming the power that we have over our kids may ultimately enable us to love them better, and more deeply. For, when we really allow ourselves to see the humblingly huge influence that we have over them, we may find ourselves relating to them with even more tenderness and care.

As we conclude the conversation, here are a few final questions to consider:

- What's one insight that you've gained from this conversation?
- What is one thing you want to change in your life as a parent, based on this conversation?
- What's one obstacle to you making that change, and how can you overcome it? Who might you need help from in order to make this change?
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HOW DO WE PRAY?

A *NURTURE THE WOW* CONVERSATION GUIDE

WELCOME

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- We will assume good faith in one another.
- We will open ourselves to listen and learn from one another.
- We won't rush to fill the silence.

Can we all agree to these things?

ASK AND SHARE

Let's take a moment to introduce ourselves. What do you think of when you hear the word, "prayer"? Take a moment to sit with the question. Then we'll go around and share our names and what came to mind.

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A conversation about prayer and parenting can be complicated for a lot of people, in different ways. Most of us enter the idea with some preconceived ideas of what it means to pray, and what that can—or can't—effect. And of those who are comfortable with the language of prayer, some find that life with small children complicates the kind of connection they might otherwise. And for some parents, having children has had a big impact on what, and how, they pray, and what they pray for.

In this excerpt from *Nurture the Wow*, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg muses on one way we can think about what it means to pray. Please read this section aloud as a group.

Prayer is a speaking on the heart. It's a means to express something of our deepest selves, and not only naming it, but offering it up to the great beyond.

This work of the heart often emerges from the hardest spaces. Sometimes it comes out of that moment when you're at the edge of your ability to cope and there's someone small for whom you are responsible who needs more from you than you feel you can possibly give. Sometimes it comes out of grief or despair or fear or anger or disassociated numbness, or an overwhelming feeling of joy that doesn't quite have a name yet. Or from a bunch of those things all at once.

Perhaps all our prayers are open expressions of resentment, desperation, hope, gratitude, wonder, frustration, or many of the other things a person might feel when he or she is up to the ears in it. Prayer can help us to name what's happening, and to pour it out to the great transcendent beyond—to turn your isolated feeling into something that connects you, that binds you to something bigger.

It is this outward offering that turns "feeling feelings" into prayer: We don't just experience them, we offer them up, to someone, something. We say, "Here, can you hold on to at least a tiny piece of this anger, frustration, and despair for just a second?" We connect our heart to the great infinite everythingness, the gushing, pulsing stream of life within and around us. We reach out. It's about tuning into that which interlinks us all, that which is present within and between us.

This might be something all people need. And we parents, whose lives are so governed by the needs and demands of tiny, snuggly little dictators and a myriad of factors out of our control, may need it even more. Most parents have woefully little time to sit in extended contemplation. Prayer—including spontaneous prayer, offered up for a brief moment while holding a baby in one's arms or bathing a fussy toddler—can offer a means of doing that work in a more spontaneous and ongoing way.

When you start to think of prayer like this, suddenly there's room for it in the corners of your life. During the chaos of the morning when you're trying to get everyone out of the house except *Where did you put my keys!?* At the grocery store, when there's a Mach Four tantrum happening at your feet. In the middle of the night, as you rinse the vomit off the beloved stuffed animal. Those times when you most feel like you're at the last straw of your patience, when you just can't anymore . . . speaking on your heart can change the game. Even just murmuring the words "this sucks" can change everything. And when you do it with the intention of giving the feeling away . . . well, there's the door to spiritual transformation

Interpretive Questions:

- How does Ruttenberg define prayer in this passage?
- How does she think parents of small children can think about prayer in their daily lives?

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- Does she distinguish between prayer offered spontaneously and prayer as part of a liturgy? If so, in what way? If not, why not?
- To whom or what does Ruttenberg think we can pray?

Reflective Questions:

- Does Ruttenberg's definition of prayer match your own understanding?
- Have you ever had an experience of prayer while with your kid(s)? If so, what happened?
- Do you have to "believe in God" (whatever that means) in order to pray? Why or why not?
- What does praying do, if anything?
- As a parent, if you pray, for what do you pray?

DO

The Book of Samuel tells us that Hannah, considered the Jewish model for prayer, "spoke on her heart." And indeed, the Talmud (Sotah 5a) once said, "A person's prayers are not heard unless he makes his heart like flesh." The desperate love that we feel for our children softens our hearts, and may indeed open up new spiritual possibilities for us.

As we conclude the conversation, here are a few final questions to consider:

- What's one insight that you've gained from this conversation?
- What is one thing you want to change in your life as a parent, based on this conversation?
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WHAT CAN OUR BODIES TEACH?

A *NURTURE THE WOW* CONVERSATION GUIDE

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ASK AND SHARE

Let's take a moment to introduce ourselves. Please take a moment to think about one way in which the physical nature of parenting stands out to you—one way in which your body, and/or your child's body, has a particularly strong impact on your parenting experience right now. After everybody's had a moment to think, we'll go around and share our names and what came to mind.

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Needless to say, caring for small children involves a lot of intense physical engagement. Even beyond the experiences that some parents have of pregnancy, childbirth, and perhaps nursing, most parents experience the relentlessness of sleep interruptions, the intoxicating power of little hugs, and what sometimes seems like a never-ending stream of boogers, germs, and all manner of other things that our children's bodies produce. But what are we to make of all this physical enmeshment? What, if anything, can we learn from and through it?

In this excerpt from *Nurture the Wow*, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg realizes that even the poopiest moments with our kids can be profound. Please read this section aloud as a group.

Parents of small children find themselves pretty routinely deep in the muck of their kids' bodily stuff. After diapers (so many diapers), there is a whole universe of potty training, accidents, reminding or dragging a kid who isn't always so mindful to the loo on a regular basis and various other assists involved in the learning process. Not to mention the days when things are just a little bit out of whack. There is, to put it bluntly, a lot of crap involved with caring for the next generation.

Judaism is a religion that's pretty big on blessings. One that tends to make folks giggle the first time they hear of it is a blessing that you're supposed to say after using the bathroom. Yes! There's a potty blessing! We do have a blessing for *everything*! We, as a people, are nothing if not thorough.

The post-bathroom liturgy is traditionally formulated as:

Blessed are You, God our deity, sovereign of the universe, who formed humans with wisdom and created within them many openings and many hollows. It is obvious in the presence of your glorious throne that if one of them were ruptured, or if one of them were blocked, it would be impossible to exist and stand in Your presence. Blessed are you, God, who heals all flesh and performs wonders.

Even if the God language in this text doesn't resonate with you, there's something important here. This blessing encourages us to experience awe in the face of the human body's complexity, and an awareness of the myriad of things that have to go right in order for us to continue drawing our next breath – and the breath after that. The fact that we're able to eliminate waste as we're meant to is a wonder in its own right, a miracle worthy of our respect and gratitude.

It's fascinating to me that it took me as long as it did to make the connection between this blessing and changing diapers, potty training, and even accidents. I've never heard anyone else write or talk about what it might mean to say this benediction after changing a diaper—which is a pity, because this is yet another place where the tradition has a powerful, important tool to help refocus our intention as we perform the labor of childcare. But it's also another place in which the tradition's blind spots are laid bare; the people writing Jewish law weren't involved in the day-to-day care of small children, so perhaps it simply didn't occur to them to deploy this blessing in this way. Their limitation, though, doesn't have to be our own. The treasures of the tradition are here for us; it's up to us to go digging in the storehouse and find the light that's just waiting to shine into our lives.

Managing our kids' waste is sometimes smelly and sometimes a hassle in other ways, but every single time our kids poop, it's because something is going right even though, for one of a thousand reasons, it could conceivably go wrong. Their bodies are working, and this is an extraordinary source of grace. There are so many ways in which

we are helpless to keep our kids safe and healthy, and for me, thinking of this blessing in the context of my kids' bathroom doings reminds me how vulnerable I really am. That's not necessarily a comfortable feeling, but I go from that into feeling thankful, and am therefore more able to appreciate the moment at hand – at least, more of the time.

There are still plenty of times when I find myself saying, "Oh, wow. This situation is *particularly* disgusting." But now, sometimes, I manage to remember that, all things considered, absolutely gross isn't so bad.

Interpretive Questions:

- Try to paraphrase the post-bathroom liturgy in contemporary language.
- What impact does Ruttenberg suggest that reciting it as part of childcare could have? Why?
- Why does she suggest that mainstream Jewish law does *not* deploy the blessing in this way? Could this be the only reason why? If not, what are other possible reasons?

Reflective Questions:

- Does the language of this blessing resonate with you? Why or why not?
- How do you make sense of what's happening when your body or your children's bodies aren't working as they should?
- What aspects of the physical nature of parenting do you find most challenging?
- When are you able to find gratitude in the physical aspects of parenting? When do you find it's hard to do?

DO

The bodies of these little humans that we have been tasked to raise are both surprisingly powerful and amazingly vulnerable. Every scraped knee, every doctor's visit, every developmental milestone, every excruciatingly long night and, yes, every poopy blowout is a chance to experience hidden (and, sure, sometimes stinky) blessings, if we're able.

As we conclude the conversation, here are a few final questions to consider:

- What's one insight that you've gained from this conversation?
- What is one thing you want to change in your life as a parent, based on this conversation?
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APPENDIX

Here is the *asher yatzar* prayer in Hebrew and English.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹקֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר יָצַר אֶת הָאָדָם בְּחָכְמָה וּבָרָא בוֹ נְקָבִים נְקָבִים חֲלוּלִים חֲלוּלִים. גָּלוּי וְיָדוּעַ לִפְנֵי כִסֵּא כְבוֹדֶךָ שֶׁאִם יִפָּתֵחַ אֶחָד מֵהֶם אוֹ יִסָּתֵם אֶחָד מֵהֶם אִי אֶפְשַׁר לְהִתְקַיֵּם וְלַעֲמוֹד לְפָנֶיךָ אֲפִילוּ שָׁעָה אֶחָת: בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' רוֹפֵא כָל בָּשָׂר וּמַפְלִיא לַעֲשׂוֹת

Blessed are You, God our deity, sovereign of the universe, who formed humans with wisdom and created within them many openings and many hollows. It is obvious in the presence of your glorious throne that if one of them were ruptured, or if one of them were blocked, it would be impossible to exist and stand in Your presence. Blessed are you, God, who heals all flesh and performs wonders.

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HOW DO WE PLAY?

A *NURTURE THE WOW* CONVERSATION GUIDE

WELCOME

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Can we all agree to these things?

ASK AND SHARE

Let's take a moment to introduce ourselves. Please take a moment to think about a recent experience with your kid(s) in regard to play. Did you play with your child(ren)? Did you let your child(ren) play alone? How did you feel in the experience? (Be honest!) After everybody's had a moment to think, we'll go around and share our names and what came to mind.

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We're told all the time that playing with our children is supposed to be a wonderful, magical experience—and sometimes it is! And sometimes it's boring, or annoying. Sometimes we are able to guide our children in our values through play, and sometimes our children have powerful lessons to teach us.

In this excerpt from *Nurture the Wow*, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg shares a story by Rabbi Nahman of Breslov, a late 18th-early 19th century Hasidic master. While the story is originally meant to be a parable about losing one's way, spiritually, it also can teach us a lot about play, if we let it. Please read this section aloud as a group.

> A prince once became mad and thought that he was a turkey. He felt compelled to sit naked under the table, pecking at bones and pieces of bread, like a turkey. All the royal physicians gave up hope of curing him of this madness. The king grieved tremendously.
>
> A sage arrived and said, "I will cure him." The sage undressed and sat naked under the table, next to the prince, picking crumbs and bones. "Who are you?" asked the prince. "What are you doing here?" "And you?" replied the sage. "What are you doing here?"
>
> "I am a turkey," said the prince. "I'm also a turkey," answered the sage.
>
> They sat together like this for some time, until they became good friends. One day, the sage signaled the king's servants to throw him shirts. He said to the prince, "What makes you think that a turkey can't wear a shirt? You can wear a shirt and still be a turkey." With that, the two of them put on shirts. After a while, the sage again signaled and they threw him pants. As before, he asked, "What makes you think that you can't be a turkey if you wear pants?" The sage continued in this manner until they were both completely dressed. Then he signaled for regular food, from the table. The sage then asked the prince, "What makes you think that you will stop being a turkey if you eat good food? You can eat whatever you want and still be a turkey!" They both ate the food. Finally, the sage said, "What makes you think a turkey must sit under the table? Even a turkey can sit at the table."
>
> The sage continued in this manner until the prince was completely cured.

Interpretive Questions:

- What is the problem of the prince in this story?
- What is the sage's proposed solution?
- Why is the sage's method effective?
- What is the sage's goal, in this story? The prince's? The king's?

Reflective Questions:

- How might this story be read as a parable about parenting and play?
- When, as a parent, are you the sage in this story?
- When, as a parent, are you the king in this story?
- When, as a parent, are you the prince in this story?

- How do you engage with play with your children?
- What do you teach your children through play?
- What do your children teach you through play?

DO

When we can let go into play with our children, all sorts of doors can open up in our relationship with them, with the present moment, with ourselves. Sometimes there are valuable lessons to be gained, and sometimes the only meaning of the moment is entering into joy itself.

As we conclude the conversation, here are a few final questions to consider:

- What's one insight that you've gained from this conversation?
- What is one thing you want to change in your life as a parent, based on this conversation?
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WHEN DO WE FEEL WHOLE?

A *NURTURE THE WOW* CONVERSATION GUIDE

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Can we all agree to these things?

ASK AND SHARE

Let's take a moment to introduce ourselves. Please think of something you've done recently that was an excellent act of self-care. We'll go around and everyone will share their name and what they thought of.

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LEARN

One of the biggest adjustments for new parents is in a colossal shift in focus. Suddenly, these new beings' needs and demands supersede many aspects of our lives. In some ways, this is liberating—we become more empathetic and compassionate as our priorities change. But in other ways, it's a challenge—when so much of our financial, emotional, logistical and psychic energy becomes invested in attending to the needs of someone else, what happens to our own needs, and sense of selfhood?

In this excerpt from *Nurture the Wow*, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg wonders how much has changed in the last 60 years in our thinking about parenting and selfhood. Please read this section aloud as a group.

One day in the early 1950s, Anne Morrow Lindbergh took herself on vacation.

It was a radical act. She was the mother of five, right in the thick of their chaotic, growing years. She was responsible for their care, for the household, and embedded in a myriad of community relationships that came with their own obligations. It was during a time when the cultural presumption that mothers weren't supposed to leave their children was awfully strong. And yet, she left.

Lindbergh settled down for a brief stay on Florida's Captiva Island. She walked along the shore. She watched the birds. She rode her bike around the island. She baked biscuits and swam and wrote down a series of musings, as they came to her, on love and family and mothering and solitude and contemplation. *Gift from the Sea* was published in 1955, and it became a major bestseller. What she had to say resonated with a lot of people—women, mostly, especially mothers. What I find startling, though, is not that her writing is wise, but that it's still very current on so many levels.

For example, as she muses on her "new awareness, both painful and humorous," about "why the saints were rarely married women," she writes that she is convinced that

> it has nothing to do with chastity. . . . It has to do primarily with distractions. The bearing, rearing, feeding and educating of children; the running of a house with its thousand details; human relationships with their myriad pulls—women's normal occupations in general run counter to the creative life, or contemplative life, or saintly life. The problem is not merely one of *Woman and Career, Woman and the Home, Woman and Independence*. It is more basically: How to remain whole in the midst of the distractions of life; how to remain balanced . . . ; how to remain strong.

Though the discourse is expanding, little by little, in terms of the kinds of options that are available and socially acceptable for mothers, there still seem to be two very distinct gears: working busily in professional engagements or working busily at home, focusing on kids and their many needs. Many women—and parents of whatever gender these days—do both of these things, in various ratios, at various times in their lives or at certain hours in their day. But sitting on the beach, alone, staring at the birds? Not so much.

The German word for what I think a lot of us feel, a lot of the time, is *Zerrissenheit*—a state of being torn into pieces.

Interpretive Questions:

- Was Lindbergh's vacation really "radical"? Why or why not?
- What does Lindbergh mean when she says that distractions "run counter to the creative life, or contemplative life, or saintly life?"
- In what ways does Ruttenberg think that Lindbergh's words are still relevant today?
- What does Ruttenberg mean when she invokes the word, "*Zerrissenheit*"?

Reflective Questions:

- Do you agree with Lindbergh that one of the primary challenges as a parent is figuring out "how to remain whole in the midst of distractions"?
- Do you feel "torn into pieces"? Why or why not?
- How has becoming a parent impacted your own spiritual or creative life, or general sense of being whole?
- What is your personal equivalent of sitting on the beach, watching birds? How often do you do this thing these days?
- Is nurturing one's own creative or spiritual self something that must happen away from children? Or can it happen with (and/or through) them?

DO

When we have kids, we discover in a new, powerful way, that it's not always about us, all the time. And this creates certain challenges, to be sure. But this transformation also opens the door for us to understand our own selfhood, and the ways in which we nourish our wellbeing, in entirely new ways, if we're willing to let it.

As we conclude the conversation, here are a few final questions to consider:

- What's one insight that you've gained from this conversation?
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HOW HAVE WE CHANGED?

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ASK AND SHARE

Let's take a moment to introduce ourselves. Please think of a parent (whether you know them personally or not) who has done something that you consider powerful and/or inspiring. We'll go around and everyone will share their name and what they thought of.

Nurture the Wow: Finding Spirituality in the Frustration, Boredom, Tears, Poop, Desperation, Wonder, and Radical Amazement of Parenting
By Danya Ruttenberg. Flatiron Books, Spring 2016. NurtureTheWow.com

LEARN

We, as humans, are hardly compartmentalized beings. Of course the ways in which we are transformed as parents impacts who we are as whole people—and that transformation may ripple in a number of directions—how we engage the non-parenting aspects of our lives, how we understand current events, how we interact with the people we meet or with whom we live in proximity.

In this excerpt from *Nurture the Wow*, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg looks to a couple of parents' stories to try to understand how our love for our kids impacts how we regard people outside our family, and perhaps the world as a whole. Please read this section aloud as a group.

Our lives change as a result of parenting in some concrete ways—how we spend our time, who we choose to meet for lunch or dinner. But some of the biggest impacts are less tangible—we regard the world with a different set of eyes. Our new vision can have implications both immediate and far-reaching, both in regards to the people in our daily lives and across the globe. For one doctor, having a child had an indelible impact on her interactions with her patients. She reflected,

Whenever people would say, "Having a child will really change you . . ." or "You'll see this differently as a parent," I thought, well, intellectually I can understand how much a person can love a child, but that must be an exaggeration. It really hit me the most when I returned to my pediatric surgery rotation. I had been on pediatric surgery as a junior resident before we had Mary Elizabeth. I cared a lot about the patients. I was very sensitive to the families, the babies, the children. But after I had Mary Elizabeth, the first time I had to operate on a child, I remember looking down and thinking, "This is someone's child."

In other words, she cared about her patients before becoming a mom, but the love and tenderness that this surgeon felt for her own daughter changed how she regarded and interacted with other people's kids as well. The doors of her heart were broken open, and the love that spilled out, spilled out everywhere.

For choreographer Makeda Thomas, this awareness made her more sensitive, less tolerant of real or even fictional scenes of brutality. As she put it, "I used to be able to watch certain violent scenes in films or television, but I can't anymore. I'm always thinking, 'That could be somebody's child.' " Even a violent movie—in which an action scene is staged—draws her in, empathetically, to experience a character's hurt from the vantage of someone who loves him. Other people's suffering, for Thomas, stopped being theoretical; others' suffering is refracted through her maternal heart and she experiences it as something that's real, something that matters.

Interpretive Questions:

- What changed for the doctor when she became a parent?
- What changed for Makeda Thomas when she became a parent?
- Is the change for the doctor and Thomas the same, or different?
- What are the practical implications for each of their attitudinal shifts?

Reflective Questions:

- Was your experience of becoming a parent similar to that of the doctor's, and/or of Thomas'?
- Has becoming a parent changed the way you think about, or interact with, other people? How you read the news? What decisions you do or don't make in your engagement with the wider world?

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- In what ways do you think the perspective shift that you, or other parents that you know or know of, have experienced is positive? In what ways less so?
- Has becoming a parent changed how you *want* to be in the world? If so, have you made concrete changes in your behavior to reflect that?

DO

Of course, having children doesn't turn us, magically, into someone we never were all along. But our feelings of love, protection and care for the smallest members of our family may open us up to new ways of thinking—and, perhaps, as a result, a new way of acting in the world.

As we conclude the conversation, here are a few final questions to consider:

- What's one insight that you've gained from this conversation?
- What is one thing you want to change in your life as a parent, based on this conversation?
- What's one obstacle to you making that change, and how can you overcome it? Who might you need help from in order to make this change?
- How can some of the insights from our conversation impact how we are together as a community?

Thank you for being part of this conversation.

This conversation guide is powered by Ask Big Questions, a project that fosters reflective conversations about life's big questions, helping people of all backgrounds deepen their understanding of themselves and others. Ask Big Questions was developed, launched, and scaled by Hillel International. Learn more at AskBigQuestions.org.

WHAT FEELS SACRED TO US?

A *NURTURE THE WOW* CONVERSATION GUIDE

WELCOME

Welcome to our conversation! We hope this will be a meaningful chance to think and share together.

In order for our conversation to be as rich as it can be, we need everyone to feel that they can both really share and really listen. Therefore, what is said in this conversation stays in this conversation, and may not be repeated outside it.

Here are a few more agreements to help shape this discussion:

- Our aim is to create a space where we can understand others and understand ourselves, not to give advice or to argue ideas of objective truth. With that in mind, in this conversation we will agree to speak in the first-person, about our own truth.
- We will assume good faith in one another.
- We will open ourselves to listen and learn from one another.
- We won't rush to fill the silence.

Can we all agree to these things?

ASK AND SHARE

Let's take a moment to introduce ourselves. Please share your name and a time when you experienced something that you would describe as sacred, or holy, or mystical, or transcendent. If you've never had an experience that you would characterize with those words, please share that.

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LEARN

God is portrayed in a number of religious traditions as a parent—often as a father, sometimes also as a mother, using a variety of metaphors. How did this come to be? And how do our own experiences as parents impact how we think about, or even perhaps experience, divinity, the transcendent, or the holy? Of course, not everybody has the same experiences, or feels comfortable using the same language, particularly around these questions. But for many of us, whatever words we ultimately choose to use, the love and mystery of our children impacts us in a variety of powerful, sometimes even surprising, ways.

In this excerpt from *Nurture the Wow*, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg looks at two people's stories for clues about how becoming a parent changed attitudes about the sacred for some people.

My mom didn't believe in God until she had kids. She was culturally Jewish, sure, but of the secular-intellectual sort, skeptical at best about any sort of supernatural claim. When my brother was born, though—well, I'm guessing she got hit upside the head with a big dose of awe and wonder. She told me a number of times when I was growing up that becoming a mom changed everything for her in her thinking about God, but, unfortunately, she died before I thought to ask her more about what she meant, what she felt, what she experienced. I'll never really know. But it's clear that *something* profound happened when my brother and I showed up. Something worldview-altering.

And the twentieth-century social activist Dorothy Day—eventually known for her devout Catholicism—hadn't been particularly religious in her youth; she struggled with her desires and despair, as so many of us do. The birth of her daughter, however, was an unexpected revelation. "No human creature could receive or contain so vast a flood of love and joy as I often felt after the birth of my child," she reflected. "With this came the need to worship, to adore. . . . Through a whole love, both physical and spiritual, I came to know God." Both physical and spiritual—not an abrogation of the body and its experiences, but using and embracing these things as part of the on-ramp to the holy.

Here, too, a new mom found herself, unexpectedly, in a new, strange space, one she never expected to enter. Birth, and its twin, death, are, for so many people, two of the greatest keys into this room—flush up against the holy, surrounded by life, by ultimate meaning, interfacing with reality in a new way.

Interpretive Questions:

- What seems to have changed for Ruttenberg's mother when she had children?
- What changed for Dorothy Day?
- What does Ruttenberg mean when she says, "Birth, and its twin, death, are, for so many people, two of the greatest keys into this room...."?
- To what degree are the examples given here about ways of thinking? Feeling? About concrete experiences?

Reflective Questions:

- Why would having kids impact some people's spiritual lives?
- What does the word "God" mean to you (whether or not you consider yourself someone who "believes in God")?
- Has becoming a parent changed how you think about God, spirituality, and/or the holy? Has it changed what kinds of questions you have about these things?

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- What kind of language do you give to the profound, powerful experiences you have with and through your children?

DO

The poet Yehuda Amichai once wrote, "A child is something else again:/on a rainy spring day/Glimpsing the Garden of Eden through the latticework/Kissing her in her sleep/Hearing footsteps in the wet pine needles." Whatever language we give to our experience of love for our children, they can, perhaps, offer us a glimpse of Eden, of some kind of sweet paradise, a world we hadn't known until their arrival.

As we conclude this conversation, here are a few final questions to consider:

- What's one insight that you've gained from this conversation?
- What is one thing you want to change in your life as a parent, based on this conversation?
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